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SUBJECT: DFM RYABKOV ON IRANIAN POLICY REVIEW, S-300S

Classified By: Ambassador John R. Beyrle: Reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (S) Summary: In a March 13 meeting with the Ambassador, DFM Ryabkov said that the March 3 P5 1 joint statement at the IAEA, coupled with Russia's decision to delay delivery of the S-300s, had sent a clear message to Tehran of the international community's common purpose. Ryabkov expressed concern over U.S. "signals" that a diplomatic initiative to Iran would fail, arguing that all efforts needed to be concentrated on convincing the Supreme Leader that the prospective U.S. change of course was serious, and also laid down a marker against countervailing U.S. arms sales. Calling Iran a "top three" issue for Medvedev's meeting with the President, Ryabkov reinforced Russian unhappiness over the Iranian rocket launch, which the Ambassador noted had been raised by the Russian President in his March 10 meeting with the Hart-Hagel Study Group. Russia does not expect the Iranian elections to produce an internal "course correction," leaving it incumbent on the international community to change Iran's behavior. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In a March 13 meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov, the Ambassador reinforced the expectation that as the U.S. prepared to invest heavily in the diplomatic track with Iran, we would look to our partners to provide additional pressure should Tehran rebuff a renewed U.S. approach. The Ambassador acknowledged the skepticism, expressed by President Medvedev on March 10 to members of Hart-Hagel Study Group, on the effectiveness of sanctions on Iran, but stressed that it was time for Tehran to signal that it sought to be a responsible member of the international community. Ryabkov responded that the joint statement issued at the IAEA March 3 meeting had sent a clear message to Iran of the P5 1's common purpose and removed any illusions the Iranian leadership may have had about cracks in the alliance. Ryabkov underscored Medvedev's message to the Study Group members that Russia could not tolerate Iran's emergence as a nuclear weapons state.

¶3. (C) Ryabkov expressed concern, however, over "signals" that senior U.S. officials did not believe that the U.S. diplomatic initiative would succeed. Preemptively suggesting that the diplomatic opening was "doomed on arrival" was the wrong approach; instead, Ryabkov argued that all of the Administration's energies should be focused on "penetrating the walls around the Supreme Leader" to reinforce that now was the time for Iran to engage in meaningful dialogue. If the U.S. inadvertently gave the impression that the effort was not serious, then its failure was inevitable. Ryabkov renewed his complaints that the UK Political Director's pessimistic approach during the last P5 1 meeting was defeatist. The Ambassador agreed that the U.S. needed to send a clear message, but reiterated the importance of Russia joining the U.S. in revising its tactics to achieve the strategic goal of a non-nuclear Iran. Just as the U.S. geared up for tough, direct diplomacy, Russia needed to review how it could strengthen its contribution to the dual-track strategy.

¶4. (S) Ryabkov underscored that Moscow had heard the U.S. message, as evidenced by developments -- or lack thereof -- in the delivery of S-300s. Russian restraint in not proceeding with the delivery, coupled with its support for the P5 1 statement at the IAEA, had been noticed by Tehran.

Nevertheless, Ryabkov expressed concern over policy papers circulated by a Washington think tank advocating U.S. arms sales to Israel to counter a potential S-300 transfer. The Ambassador welcomed Russia's decision to defer delivery of the S-300s and urged continued restraint. While noting long-standing concerns over aspects of Russian arms transfers, the Ambassador distinguished think tank policy papers from official U.S. policies.

15. (C) The question of Iran, and proliferation more broadly, would figure high on Medvedev's agenda in his meeting with the President, with Ryabkov calling it a "top three" issue. Acknowledging the Administration's "sense of urgency," Ryabkov emphasized that the Iranian rocket launch had been poorly received by the Russian leadership. The Ambassador welcomed Medvedev's candid discussion of the Iranian threat with the Hart-Hagel Study Group, noting the Russian President's characterization that the rocket launch had made a "heavy impression," as well as his readiness to link the issue of European security to Iranian nuclear developments. Ryabkov stressed that there should be no ambiguity over Russian reactions to Iranian and DPRK efforts to advance their missile technology, noting FM Lavrov's explicit instructions to the media that Russia was not "relaxed" by either the Iranian launch or prospective DPRK satellite test. While this was a factual statement, Ryabkov commented, it also sent a clear message to the regimes.

16. (C) In the period leading up to the Iranian presidential elections, Ryabkov said there would be no surprises on the Russian side in terms of engagement with Tehran. There were no plans for high-level meetings in the next three months, as Iran entered the "crucial phase" of its campaign period. Ryabkov said it would be a mistake to underestimate President Ahmadinejad's prospects, with Iranian internal dynamics not indicating a dramatic change or policy course correction. Ryabkov predicted that "more or less" the same policy line would emerge from the presidential elections, forcing the P5 1 and international community to influence Iran from the outside, since the likelihood of reform from within would remain low.

BEYRLE

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